

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.2, 20 April 2018



Sexual Ethics and Islam

Podcast with **Kecia Ali** (24 April 2017).

Interviewed by **Christopher Cotter**

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at: <https://religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/sexual-ethics-and-islam/>

Chris Cotter (CC): *Alongside the problematic dominant caricature of Islam as a violent religion, there's perhaps no issue so problematic in contemporary Western discourse on Islam than discussions surrounding sexuality and gender. Western stereotypes of down-trodden Muslim women are often countered by claims of Islamic scholars that women are more liberated, respected and secure within Islam than in other religions or in the "secular" West. Regular listeners to the Religious Studies Project will be unsurprised to learn that there's a lot more going on below the surface of these dominant discourses. Why are "we" even having this discussion about sexual ethics and Islam? How might one begin to study such a vast and problematic topic? What are some of the prescient issues that recur in this contested field? And what is the broader significance of this discussion for religious studies in general? To discuss these issues and more, I'm joined today by [Kecia Ali](#), who is Professor of Religion at Boston University. Professor Ali is a scholar of religion, gender and ethics whose work focusses mostly on the Muslim tradition, with an emphasis on law and biography. She is currently Status Committee Director at the AAR and is a past president of the Society for the Study of Muslim Ethics. Her publication list is impressive and features five monographs, including [The Lives of Muhammed, Marriage and Slavery in Early Islam](#), and – most relevant to today's interview – [Sexual Ethics in Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith and Jurisprudence](#), originally published in 2006, with an expanded revised edition published in 2016. So, Professor Ali, welcome to the Religious Studies Project!*

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Kecia Ali (KA): Thank you for having me.

CC: *And thanks for joining us here in Edinburgh in the [Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Centre for Study of Islam in the Contemporary World](#).*

KA: That's a mouthful isn't it?

CC: *It is a mouthful, but they're graciously hosting us today. And we'll be sure to shout out about your lecture that you're doing this evening, when we publish this podcast. So first-off, Islam? Sexual ethics? Why are we even having this discussion?*

KA: Yes, it's sort of impossible not to be having the discussion, really. I think the challenge is to find ways to have it that are productive and don't just inadvertently reinforce the power of certain dominant discourses by contesting them, if that's the only thing we do. Look, the question of gendered roles and rights and obligations is one that has been present since – as near as we can tell – the first Muslim community, right? Scripture records specific questions about women's and men's respective roles, relationship to each other, relationship to religious obligations, relationship to God, etc. Certainly, accounts of the Prophet's normative community are replete with gendered descriptions and contestations. Now, obviously, to what extent these reflect a 7th-century community and to what extent they reflect 8th/ 9th/10th-century reflections on that community and attempts to ascribe certain later, normative patterns onto that community, that's a subject of debate among historians of Islam. But, for Muslims, pious Muslims, lay folk, scholars, these are the stories out of which accounts of virtuous ethical life are made. So Muslims certainly have been having internal conversations about gender norms since quite early on. Now, why are "we" having this conversation?

CC: *Yes.*

KA: Sexuality is always one of the things that comes up when someone wants to insult someone else, right? When one community, or members of a community are looking for a way to stigmatise, oppose, define "others", sexuality is very frequently something that gets pressed into service. Whether that's Protestants saying bad things about

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Catholics, Catholics saying bad things about Protestants, Protestants saying bad things about Catholics by likening them to Muslims, or the reverse, sexuality frequently comes into play. What we know, if we want to just in very broad terms talk about “The West and Islam” – and I object on principle to those categories, but I’m going to use them anyway as a kind of shorthand – we see, really, that in the Middle Ages and in the Early Modern era, it wasn’t Muslim oppression of women that was a problem for anybody, it was Muslim lustfulness and debauchery. And it’s really in the 19th-century, with the advent of European colonialism in Muslim majority societies – Egypt, for instance, and also India – that Muslim men’s oppressiveness towards women becomes part of a colonial discourse about civilisation, right? What’s very interesting is to look at the ways that the kinds of accusations levelled against Muslims have really changed over time. So not only from wantonness to oppression, but also you’ll find that today one of the things that tends to get said of Muslims is: “Oh, they’re so intolerant of homosexuality! They’re so repressive! Look how awful . . . !” Well, in the Early Modern era, and even into the 19th-century, the claim was, “They’re too tolerant of homosexuality!” They are attached to the practice of sodomy, “Unlike us upright Brits,” usually, right? And, “Look how awful they are, compared to how moral we are,” which is basically the gist of all of this. And of course there are Muslims equally scandalised by Western women’s dress and the ways in which women and men outside their family interact.

CC: *And that’s an important link there, then, when you mention the Muslim perspective. Because contemporary Muslims, whether we’re talking scholars or lay people going about their lives, are having to articulate their views against this dominant Western view.*

KA: Yes, I mean, I think part of what’s particularly challenging for me as a scholar, and for media, for lay folk, for religious studies teachers in the classroom, is : how do we talk about this in way that actually recognises the great diversity of perspectives among Muslims? Because, you know, even that phrase, “the Muslim perspective” . . . it’s one that gets bandied about a lot, including by many Muslims. And, of course, part of what’s interesting to me as a scholar of religion, is: how are claims to representing the “authoritative Muslim perspective” being pressed? What are the sources being

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cited? What are the extra-textual authoritative norms being deployed? How much is it about where you got your degree from? How much is it about whether you have a beard? How much is it about whether the media is calling you speak on their programmes? And how much is it about the content of your ideas?

CC: *Yes. And that's something that comes up in Aaron Hughes' [Islam and the Tyranny of Authenticity](#)*

KA: Absolutely.

CC: *We've had him on the [podcast before](#) and he talked about something completely different. We're going to have to get him on again for that! But, yes, a very broad topic we're talking about here: sexual ethics and Islam. How does one even go about studying that? I know that you had your own particular approach . . .*

KA: So, the book *Sexual Ethics and Islam* really has its roots in two different things I was doing around the turn of the millennium. I did my doctoral dissertation at Duke University, about marriage and divorce in 8th -10th-century Sunni Muslim Jurisprudence. At the same time, 2001-2003, I was working part-time for the [Feminist Sexual Ethics Project](#) at Brandeis University, which was directed by Bernadette Broton and funded by the Ford Foundation. And so, for the dissertation, which I defended in 2002, I was really looking at about a dozen early Arabic legal texts. And for the Feminist Sexual Ethics Project I was actually engaged in putting together a series of short essays for the site, aimed at lay folks – not necessarily Muslim – looking for a general orientation to the Muslim textual tradition. So, Qur'anic and prophetic tradition – to some extent exegesis, to some extent legal tradition – framing particular kinds of issues: issues around female dress, issues around marriage, around divorce, around slavery, around same-sex relationships, but framed in a kind of general way that would make them accessible. And I also wanted to begin to address the ways Muslims today were talking about those topics. *Sexual Ethics and Islam* really came together out of those two initiatives because, on the one hand, what I found when I was looking at the way contemporary Muslims were talking about these topics, is that they were often completely disconnected and, in fact, making claims that really

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contradicted, sometimes the positions, but far more often the logic and the assumptions of the early legal tradition. And I wanted to put those two things into conversation: put the 10th-century and the 21st-century into conversation. And I was very frustrated by the kind of “Islam liberated women” apologetic that a lot of Muslims were presenting. And I was equally frustrated with the sort of patriarchal, protective, protectionist . . . you know, “Well, of course, patriarchy *done right* is the only true Islamic tradition, that protects and respects women.” Which exists in a kind of funny tension with “No, no. The Qur’an and the Prophet Muhammed gave Muslim women all their rights and so there’s no need for patriarchy, because Islam is *against* patriarchy.” And none of these really grappling with, “What is it that’s there in the texts?”

CC: *And that – when you mentioned the Prophet Muhammed – is perhaps an excellent way for us to leap right into some of that analysis. I know that the undergrads at New College, in Edinburgh, will be quite familiar with the chapter of the book that focuses on the Prophet’s relationship with his wife Aisha, so maybe we could use that as an example of these various competing discourses and how people use claims to authority to negotiate sexual ethics?*

KA: Sure, so of course, for the pre-modern Muslim tradition, Aisha is an absolutely vital figure. She is the youngest of the Prophet’s wives, many say his favourite wife – certainly after Khadijah died, who was the wife of his younger years – and she’s a scholar, and she’s a contentious political figure and certainly, for the construction of Sunni identity, she becomes a flash point in those debates over loyalty, over succession, over precedence. And [Chase Robinson](#) – I’m going to paraphrase him now – says that Early Christians argued about Christology and early Muslims argued over how 7th-century Muslims’ behaviour should be remembered, right? So, later Muslims are trying to construct their own authentic narratives, their own strategies of power, by reference to these early Muslims. And so Aisha was absolutely central there. Which means that the ways in which she’s remembered ends up being very central. The texts that are giving people fits today really are texts about her marriage, in which she reports in the first person, in Hadith narratives – narratives of Prophetic tradition – that she was six or, in another version, seven when the prophet married her, and nine

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when the marriage was consummated. And there are other details sometimes given in these accounts. Now it's useful to point out that this isn't something that people were particularly worried about for a very long time. And it's actually really unusual that any of his wives' ages would be so important in texts about the marriage. But this is there in the Hadith compilations that we have from the 9th-century. And this is similar to the ages that are reported by early biographers, who maybe sometimes go as high as 10. But really, it's quite a young age that's reported in these texts. And generally, over the centuries, Muslim biographers didn't particularly have any issue with this. Western biographers didn't particularly have any issue with this. None of them took much notice, until we get to just about 1700, when Humphrey Prideaux, who was an Anglican clergyman, writes a very nasty biography of Muhammed as, actually, part of his ongoing debate with Unitarian Christians. And he says, "Oh isn't this sort-of amazing there in Arabia, which is the same climate as India," just like in all these other hot countries, the torrid zone, "how women mature so quickly". And, for him, Aisha's age of 6 and 8 is an indication of something that is sort-of exotic and erotic. What he's worrying about, though, is that Muhammed is marrying her to make an allegiance with her father, which shows that he is making a power grab, in service of his fraudulent imposture. And basically, it only is really in the late 19th/early 20th-century that people start to, maybe, wonder about this a little bit . . . Western biographers. And by the late 20th-century it's making lots of people uncomfortable, including some Muslims. So the Arabic translation of Washington Irving, for instance – who thought this was all very romantic in the middle of the 19th-century – in the 1960s, when it's being translated in Egypt, the translator adds a real note, right? And the original marriage has been demoted to a betrothal, and then the translator feels the need to sort-of explain this. But, by the time I'm writing *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, the context is different and there are two very serious competing strains. There's a set of polemical accusations that Muhammed is a paedophile, which the Rev Jerry Vines has linked in an epithet as "[Demon-possessed paedophile](#)". So he's linking a very old accusation against Muhammed with a very new one: a sort of medicalised rhetoric of evil. And then you start to have Muslim apologetics around this question, which say several things. One is that, "Well, things were different back then". And a version of that is what a number

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of secular, sympathetic Western academics have also said. And then, the other thing that you get is, “Well, these texts really aren’t reliable on this point.” And the thing that I point out in *Sexual Ethics and Islam* is: it’s completely fine if you want to make that argument, but then it’s a problem if you turn to those texts as absolutely true on everything else. The thing that was really striking for me, after writing *Sexual Ethics and Islam* and moving onto the project that became the *Lives of Muhammed* – which is an investigation of Biographical texts, specifically – is the ways in which, so often in early texts, numbers have a particular kind of symbolic function and resonance. And while I don’t know that six and seven, or nine and ten have the symbolic resonance that say forty does in the accounts of Khadijah’s age, it seems to me that there is plausibly . . . I don’t want to say probably, and I don’t think we can ever know with any kind of certainty these are factually accurate unless we’re simply willing to say, “These texts are all factually accurate and we accept that.” It seems to me, plausibly, there’s an argument to be made that the very low numbers given for her age are in service of praising her, actually; of presenting her as a particularly pure figure, which is very important given that her chastity was impugned during her lifetime, or at least according to texts. They represent this as something that was challenged. And so making her so young at marriage, emphasising her virginity, becomes a way of emphasising her sexual purity. The other thing, it seems to me, is that it’s possible that making her, say nine, when the marriage is consummated, after the Hijrah to Medina, is also a way of making her age low enough that she’s indisputably born to Muslim parents. So although virtually everybody in that first Muslim community would be a convert – according to pious narratives – by the time these Hadith texts are being compiled, having your parents already be Muslim, being born to Muslim parents is quite a status marker. It becomes important to have a genealogy of Muslim parents going further back.

CC: *So, time is already running on here! In terms of positioning: you’re a woman, a Western academic, a feminist . . .*

KA: And a Muslim

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CC: *And a Muslim, writing this book, discussing these topics, how was it received? My stereotypical brain is going, “This isn’t going to be that well received in some circles”. So how do you position yourself, in that respect?*

KA: One of the more flattering things somebody once told me about the book, was that her graduate advisor – who was also a Muslim man – had suggested that she not read it, because it would be dangerous. And I thought, “Oh! I must have done something right!” (laughs) But, on the other hand, I think that my original intention for the book was not really to have it end up where it’s ended up, which is in the classroom mostly with students, many of whom are not Muslim. This was written, originally, very much as a book that was engaged in a kind of intra-Muslim conversation, to address some frustrations I had with the way intra-Muslim conversations over issues of sexual ethics, were going: I thought, in not particularly productive ways. However, I’m not writing it only as a Muslim feminist. I’m writing as a scholar of Religious Studies. And I know there are some people who don’t think you can or should do both of those things, but I have Religious Studies training. And one of the things that that training enables me to do is to look at the ways in which particular traditions are being constructed, in which particular claims to authority are being made in particular ways. So, for instance, the chapter on female genital cutting in the book is really an extended meditation on: what does the category Islamic, and what do claims to the category Islamic – or, more pertinently, “un-Islamic” – tell us? How useful are they? And where might things that are useful in particular kinds of activist campaigns really break down, if we’re trying to look at them historically, or from within Religious Studies, or from within the world of scholarship, at all?

CC: *Yes. And I can remember the students being a little bit frustrated in the sense that so many different points of view were being considered – and not being necessarily condemned – and they were all . . . “Which is the right way?!” (laughs)*

KA: I mean, look, answers are great. I have a lot fewer answers than I have questions. And, if anything, in the expanded edition of the book there are even more questions

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and even fewer answers! But, look, I don't think we're going to get better answers until we get better at asking the right questions.

CC: *Exactly*

KA: And the right questions are very often – and not just for Muslims, and not just about Muslim questions – what's behind what we're being told? What's the evidence for this perspective? Where is this coming from? And how much credit do we want to give it as an accurate representation of something in the world?

CC: *And that leads me into, sort of, where I was wanting to get to in the interview – and you've been a fantastic interviewee. Religious Studies: I can imagine that some will have maybe seen the title of this interview and thought, "Oh, that's Area Studies, Islamic Studies. I don't need to go there." You know, everything that you've been saying, I think, has been illustrating why this is important for the broader study of religion, but I just, maybe, wondered if you wanted to reflect on that from your perspective . . . in multiple different camps.*

KA: Yes. I mean, within the academic world of scholars who study Islam and Muslims, some come from Area Studies training: Middle East Studies, Near Eastern Studies, Islamic Studies. Some are really trained to philological work with old texts, and there's a lot of good work that's being done with those texts. And some are not trained to work with those texts and instead are very historical, very presentist, very ethnographic in ways that, I think, sometimes make it difficult to understand the resonance of the appeal to the textual tradition that many Muslims take. I'm very fortunate that the American Academy of Religion brings together, in the programme units that study Islam, quite a fabulous group of scholars who have expertise in training in a variety of different disciplines, but who are committed – at least some of the time in their professional engagement – to Religious Studies as a discipline, which is of course inter-disciplinary of necessity. And I think, given that so many questions about Islam are really pivotal to questions that Religious Studies as a discipline is wrestling with, about the rights and roles and responsibilities of insiders and outsiders, with the formation of the category of religion Look, it's not an accident that Orientalist, Imperialist categories are very much at play here. I think it's tremendously important

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that Islamic Studies be having conversations with folks in Religious Studies and vice versa, to the extent that you can even draw distinctions between them.

CC: *And so, on the topic of conversations between different fields, your work's taken a different turn of late?*

KA: (laughs) Yes. A detour!

CC: *Your latest book, [Human in Death: Morality and Mortality in JD Robb's Novels](#) . . . What's this got to do with Islam? (laughs)*

KA: Well, at one level, nothing. And at the other level, I suppose, everything. I read these novels recreationally. It's a series that's been ongoing over 20 years, published by Nora Roberts, whose a premier American author of popular romance, under the pseudonym JD Robb. They are police procedurals, set in New York, circa 2060, and I read them. And I had things to say about them, and about the way that they deal with intimate relationships; about the way they deal with friendship; about the way they deal with work, especially women's work; about the way they deal with violence, including police violence; about the way they deal with what it means to be a human being; about abilities and perfection and the idea of a post-human future. And I think that, to the extent that this book connects to my other work, it's really around the questions of ethics: what it means to live a good, ethical, virtuous life in connection with other human beings in a given set of circumstances. I trained as a historian before I moved into Religious Studies. And one of the things that comes up again in this series – just like it comes up looking at 8th and 9th-century legal texts and biographies – is that understanding the present is sometimes best done from a distance. So looking comparatively at the past, looking at one possible imagined future, can give us a new perspective on the world we're living in right now.

CC: *Wonderful. And that, also, illustrates even more the importance of your work with Islamic texts, with contemporary Islam, sexual ethics. And it's been fantastic that we've been having this conversation on International Women's Day! So, I know this won't be going out for another few months, but just to get that onto the recording from the Alwaleed Centre. And I think we're going to*

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have to draw that to a close there. It's been fantastic speaking with you. And I wish you all the best with the lecture this evening, which, if the recording of the lecture goes ok, we'll [link](#) to it from this page and everyone can see it and hear it, in all its glory!

KA: Thanks

CC: *Thank you.*

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